FWIS 185

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

Current U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith recently claimed that, in opposition to traditional lyric poetry, contemporary American verse now seems "concerned with seeking revelation not in privacy, but in community. Not in the meditative mind but in bustling bodies in shared space, in the transactions our physical selves are marked and marred by." The lyric "I" is no longer alone, she suggests, but rather "speaking to a large, shifting, contradictory, multivalent body that is not guaranteed to hear or even to agree…It is speaking at once from and to something like America." We will explore Smith's claim in this course by reading the work of several recent American poets who write within and against the lyric tradition and discussing the ways in which their voices navigate public and private life. In addition to developing your interpretive toolkits, critical thinking skills, and writing abilities, the course will allow you to explore a number of key questions about poetry's place in contemporary life.

Because it is a Freshman Writing Intensive Seminar (FWIS), writing will obviously be an essential component of the course. This means that, by taking this course, you will:

1. Enhance your understanding of the central place of writing and communication in the learning process and in academic life;
2. Learn strategies for analyzing, synthesizing, organizing, and responding to college-level materials;
3. Improve your ability to communicate correctly and effectively in writing and in speech, taking into account audience and purpose;
4. Become comfortable with writing as a process and learn strategies—for instance, prewriting, outlining, and revision—for working through that process;
5. Learn appropriate use of the work of others and, where necessary, specific practices of citation; and
6. Learn to articulate oral arguments and to respond productively to arguments of others in formal presentations and in-class discussions.

In short, though, the purpose of this course is to show you some ways to read more deeply, to come up with more interesting insights on how different pieces of writing work, to have informed, intelligent reasons for liking or disliking a piece of writing, and to write—clearly, persuasively, and above all interestingly—about the things you've read and thought about.

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UNIT 1: COURSE INTRODUCTION

M, 1/13 Course Introduction

- What you need to do before class: Learn where the classroom is and how long it will take you to get there / Show up on time with a folder, a notebook, and a writing implement / Turn off your phones and close your computers / Prepare yourself physically and mentally for the seminar / Introduce yourself to your neighbor(s) and talk casually until class begins / Or, if you need to chill, you can skip that last part

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce myself and explain what this course is about / You'll introduce yourselves / I'll go over policies and rationales / You'll ask questions / We'll do some language exercises

W, 1/15 Poetry, Public and Private

- What you need to do before class: Review the syllabus and write down any questions you have / Read Tracy K. Smith's "Politics and Poetry" and the poems mentioned in it / Write a short summary of Smith's argument / Print your summary out / Prepare to discuss it in class

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss Smith's essay and what it has to teach us about contemporary American poetry in 2020 / You'll explain your summary to the class / I'll introduce some key concepts in poetics

M, 1/20 * No Class *

W, 1/22 The Lyric Tradition

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected definitions of lyric poetry / Read the selected lyric poems / Think about how each poem relates to the various definitions of lyric poetry

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce some of the issues regarding lyric poetry / We'll discuss the readings slowly and carefully / We'll do some exercises to reinforce the applicability of the key concepts in poetics

M, 1/27 Aversive Thinking

- What you need to do before class: Read Charles Bernstein's "State of the Art" / Read the selected poems / Think about how each poem relates to Bernstein's essay

- What we will do in class: I'll contextualize Bernstein's essay / We'll discuss the readings slowly and carefully / We'll do some more exercises to reinforce the applicability of the key concepts in poetics

W, 1/29 Close Reading

- What you need to do before class: Read Jane Gallop's "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters" / Read the selected poems / Think about how the strategies Gallop proposes can be usefully applied to the poems / Consider how the strategies Gallop proposes can be applied to situations in your own life

- What we will do in class: I'll contextualize Gallop's essay / We'll discuss the readings slowly and carefully / We'll discuss the ways that close reading can help us beyond the study of poetry

UNIT 2: AZTECS, EXIT WOUNDS, AND ME

M, 2/3 Natalie Diaz

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Natalie Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the critical debates we talked about in the first unit

- What we will do in class: I'll collect your Close Reading Response Papers / I'll introduce Natalie Diaz and her work / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key critical debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 2/5 Natalie Diaz

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Natalie Diaz's *When My Brother Was an Aztec* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the critical debates we talked about in the first unit

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key critical debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 2/10 Ocean Vuong

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first unit

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce Ocean Vuong and his work / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 2/12 Ocean Vuong

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first unit

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 2/17 Tony Hoagland

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Tony Hoagland's *What Narcissism Means to Me* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first unit

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce Tony Hoagland and his work / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 2/19 Tony Hoagland

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Tony Hoagland's *What Narcissism Means to Me* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first unit

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 2/24 Writing Workshop

- What you need to do before class: Complete the Planning Guide for Essay #1 / Print it out / Prepare to explain it to the class

- What we will do in class: You'll explain your essay to the class / You'll work in groups to think about the content, structure, and style of your essay as well as ways to improve it

UNIT 3: LOOK

W, 2/26 Philip Levine

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Philip Levine's *What Work Is* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the critical debates we talked about in the first two units

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce Philip Levine and his work / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key critical debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 3/2 Philip Levine

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Philip Levine's *What Work Is* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first two units

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 3/4 Solmaz Sharif

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Solmaz Sharif's *Look* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first two units

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce Solmaz Sharif and her work / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key critical debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 3/9 Solmaz Sharif

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Solmaz Sharif's *Look* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the critical debates we talked about in the first two units

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key critical debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 3/11 Writing Workshop

- What you need to do before class: Complete the Planning Guide for Essay #2 / Print it out / Prepare to explain it to the class

- What we will do in class: You'll explain your essay to the class / You'll work in groups to think about the content, structure, and style of your essay as well as ways to improve it

M, 3/16 * No Class *

W, 3/18 * No Class *

UNIT 4: CITIZEN(S)

M, 3/23 Against Expression

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first three units

- What we will do in class: I'll contextualize the anthology / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 3/25 Against Expression

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first three units

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 3/30 Claudia Rankine

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first three units

- What we will do in class: I'll introduce Claudia Rankine and her work / We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 4/1 Claudia Rankine

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first three units

- What we will do in class: What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 4/6 Claudia Rankine

- What you need to do before class: Read the selected poems in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* / Explore the contextual materials on Canvas / Prepare to share your thoughts about the poems and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first three units

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the poems slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 4/8 Writing Worksop

- What you need to do before class: Complete the Planning Guide for Essay #3 / Print it out / Prepare to explain it to the class

- What we will do in class: You'll explain your essay to the class / You'll work in groups to think about the content, structure, and style of your essay as well as ways to improve it

UNIT 5: COURSE CONCLUSION

M, 4/13 Popular Music as Poetry

- What you need to do before class: Add a song to the class playlist / Listen to the songs as many times and in as many contexts as you can muster / Prepare to share your thoughts about the songs and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first four units

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the songs slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

W, 4/15 Popular Music as Poetry

- What you need to do before class: Listen to the songs as many times and in as many contexts as you can muster / Prepare to share your thoughts about the songs and how they relate to the debates we talked about in the first four units

- What we will do in class: We'll discuss the songs slowly and carefully on their own and in terms of key debates in the field of contemporary poetry

M, 4/20 Student Presentations 1

- What you need to do before class: Continue working on your Poetry Portfolio / Prepare for your presentation.

- What we will do in class: Half of the class will present their Poetry Portfolios.

W, 4/22 Student Presentations 2

- What you need to do before class: Continue working on your Poetry Portfolio / Prepare for your presentation.

- What we will do in class: Half of the class will present their Poetry Portfolios

TBD Final Exam / Final Projects Due

REQUIRED TEXTS + EXPENSES

Please purchase the following books as soon as possible. I will provide you with copies of all other readings:

- Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein - *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*
- Natalie Diaz - *When My Brother Was an Aztec*
- Ocean Vuong - *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*
- Solmaz Sharif - *Look*
- Claudia Rankine - *Citizen: An American Lyric*

I would also recommend buying a folder and a notebook that you use only for this class.

GRADING

You will receive detailed instructions and a grading rubric for each assignment well before it's due. For your final grade, though, I will use this formula:

- 10% = Participation
- 10% = Close Reading Response Paper
- 15% = Essay #1
- 20% = Essay #2
- 25% = Essay #3
- 20% = Poetry Portfolios

POLICIES

Attendance - It is expected that you will show up to each class session on time, with the reading done and any assignments ready to turn in. However, you are allowed one free absence. If you miss more than that, without a truly legitimate excuse, your final grade will drop by a third of a letter (i.e. from a B+ to a B) with each additional absence. If you consistently show up late, your grade may also drop.

Participation - Simply showing up, however, is the least you can do. Because this is a small, discussion-based seminar, it is expected that you will also be an active participant. This means that you will have done the reading, brought the text to class, *and* have some interesting things to say about it. It also means that you will listen to others and respond to them with curiosity and respect. If any of these conditions are not met, your participation grade will drop.

Electronic Policy - You must turn off all electronic devices before class begins. This includes phones, watches, e-readers, and laptops (except when specifically allowed). If I see you breaking this rule, your participation grade will drop.

Formatting Assignments - All written assignments must be printed out, stapled together, and submitted in class on the day they are due (unless otherwise noted on the assignment sheet). They should be double-spaced, written in 12-point font (preferably Times New Roman), and have 1-inch margins. They should contain your name, the date, an insightful title, and a correctly-formatted works cited page. If any of these conditions are not met, your assignment grade will drop.

Rewrites - Because this is a writing-intensive seminar, and because rewriting is an essential part of the writing process, you are welcome to rewrite any major paper, provided that: 1) I believe you gave the first draft your best effort; 2) you meet with me in person to discuss your original paper and your plans for the rewrite; and 3) you turn in the rewrite within one week of our meeting. The grade you receive on the rewrite will replace the grade you received on the original paper (even if it's lower).

Plagiarism - Familiarize yourself with the Rice University Honor Code, if you have not done so already. The bottom line, though, is that plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade. You need to think for yourself and cite the work of others by using some well-regarded style guide (MLA, Chicago, etc.). We will go over citation practices in class, but please ask if you have any questions.

Accommodations - If you have a documented disability that requires academic adjustments, please: 1) make sure this documentation is on file with Disability Support Services (Allen Center, Room 111 / adarice@rice.edu /x5841 / https://dss.rice.edu); and 2) meet with me to discuss your needs sometime during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain confidential.

Meetings - I am happy to meet with you to discuss readings, class discussions, writing assignments, etc. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or want to talk; just send me an email and we will find a time that works. I just ask that you plan ahead because, in general, I only answer emails once a day. I also encourage you to take advantage of the Center for Professional and Academic Communication (located on the 2nd floor of Fondren.)